

**Before the
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
Washington, DC 20554**

In the Matter of)	
)	
Emergency Connectivity Funding)	WC Docket No. 21-93
to Close the Homework Gap)	

REPLY COMMENTS OF THE URBAN LIBRARIES COUNCIL

The Urban Libraries Council (ULC)¹ respectfully submits these comments in response to the Wireline Competition Bureau's Public Notice for comments² on the Emergency Connectivity Fund for Educational Connections and Devices to Address the Homework Gap During the Pandemic. ULC welcomes this opportunity to provide the Commission with information regarding how public libraries can leverage the expansion of the FCC's E-rate program to connect individuals and families who lack home broadband access.

Despite some progress in closing the digital divide over the past decades, 18 million³ or 14% of U.S. households still don't have broadband. Fifteen million⁴ of those households are in urban areas where broadband is available yet unaffordable for many who are also dealing with housing and food insecurity. While the need is high in many urban communities, studies show that all low-income and many rural communities also are disproportionately affected. According to a Pew survey published in 2019, less than two-thirds of Americans in rural areas⁵ have a broadband internet connection at home. Among those with household incomes below \$30,000,⁶ four out of 10 don't have a computer, and three out of 10 don't have a smartphone. Beyond financial barriers, these low-income residents also face significant gaps in accessing

¹ The Urban Libraries Council is an innovation and impact tank of North America's leading public library systems. ULC drives cutting-edge research and strategic partnerships to elevate the power of libraries as essential, transformative institutions for the 21st-century. Over 150 member libraries in the U.S. and Canada rely on ULC to identify significant challenges facing today's communities and provide new tools and techniques to help libraries achieve stronger outcomes in education, digital equity, workforce and economic development, and race and social equity. More information is available at <https://www.urbanlibraries.org>.

² Emergency Connectivity Funding, Public Notice, WC Docket No. 21-93. (Mar. 16, 2021). <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DA-21-317A1.pdf>.

³ Horrigan, John B. (Nov. 30, 2020). "How Much Broadband Speed Do Americans Need?" The Pew Charitable Trusts. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2020/11/30/how-much-broadband-speed-do-americans-need>.

⁴ Horrigan, John B. (Aug. 14, 2019). "Analysis: Digital Divide Isn't Just a Rural Problem." The Daily Yonder. <https://www.dailyyonder.com/analysis-digital-divide-isnt-just-a-rural-problem/2019/08/14>.

⁵ Perrin, Andrew. (May 31, 2019). "Digital gap between rural and nonrural America persists." Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/31/digital-gap-between-rural-and-nonrural-america-persists/>.

⁶ Anderson, Monica & Kumar, Madhumitha. (May 7, 2019). "Digital divide persists even as lower-income Americans make gains in tech adoption." Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/07/digital-divide-persists-even-as-lower-income-americans-make-gains-in-tech-adoption/>.

opportunities to develop basic digital skills and finding support for minor issues that come with new technology adoption.

During COVID-19, a Pew survey released in 2020 highlights that 43% of lower-income parents of children whose schools shut down say it is very or somewhat likely their children will have to do schoolwork on their cellphones, 40% report the same likelihood of their child having to use public Wi-Fi to finish schoolwork because there is not a reliable internet connection at home, and about one-third (36%) say it is at least somewhat likely their children will not be able to complete schoolwork because they do not have access to a computer at home.⁷ By exposing and widening the depth of the digital divide, the coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the urgent need for a new approach to make sure everyone can participate fully in digital life, regardless of their income or need to access broadband outside of their physical home.

As trusted and well-connected community anchors, public libraries are essential community leaders and partners for ensuring equitable access to broadband, digital devices and tech support in their communities. Millions of people across the country are completely without digital access except for their local public library.⁸ These inequities and resulting gaps in education and opportunities for low-income students were painfully apparent even prior to COVID-19 as students sat in library parking lots to complete their homework using the library's Wi-Fi after hours. Since this time, the need for home access to the internet has become even more critical.

For decades, libraries have helped to strengthen community connectivity and reduce barriers to digital access by focusing on digital inclusion efforts such as public access technology, open Wi-Fi networks, device lending programs and classes. However, in recent years libraries have started to shift the focus of their digital inclusion work to address systemic barriers, recognizing the inseparable connection between the digital divide and race, economic, education and social divides.

ULC has collected data and performance metrics for over 3,000 libraries from across urban, suburban and rural communities through its benchmarking platform Edge,⁹ showing that:

- Libraries in the United States consistently contribute to community-wide digital inclusion initiatives, including the library's capacity to manage technology investments.

⁷ Vogels, E.A., Perrin, A., Rainie, L. & Anderson, M. (April 30, 2020). "53% of Americans Say the Internet Has Been Essential During the COVID-19 Outbreak." Pew Research Center.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/04/30/53-of-americans-say-the-internet-has-been-essential-during-the-covid-19-outbreak/>.

⁸ Becker, S., Crandall, M.D., Fisher, K.E., Kinney, B., Landry, C & Rocha, A. (2010). "Opportunity for All: How American Public Benefits from Internet Access at U.S. Libraries." Institute of Museum and Library Services.
https://www.ims.gov/sites/default/files/publications/documents/opportunityforall_0.pdf.

⁹ Edge is a performance measurement program that guides public libraries of all sizes to set measurable, strategic goals for digital inclusion and to engage local leaders in meaningful conversations about 21st-century community needs. More information is available at <http://www.libraryedge.org/>.

- 78% of libraries provide homework help, online resources and support for students during the critical out-of-school hours.
- Entering the COVID-19 crisis, just 26% of libraries loaned internet enabled devices and 21% loaned hotspots. The major barrier reported by library systems is lack of financial resources and budget limitations.

Further, libraries reach across age groups critical to addressing inequities in education and the achievement gap and are trusted by hard-to-reach, low-income and under-resourced communities. This includes support provided by almost all libraries designed to reach parents, caregivers and children with essential and free early literacy programs. Often not identified as an area of greatest need, the gaps that COVID-19 is creating in early learning fueled by the digital divide will be felt by a generation.

This shift in the role of 21st-century libraries has been rapidly accelerated by the pandemic, which has made it clear that relying on physical spaces and outreach is not a sustainable solution to building fully connected communities. The pandemic also made it clear that closing the digital divide is a task that is too broad for any institution to take on alone. Community-wide partnerships will be vital for addressing the urgent digital needs facing people everywhere, especially for those from traditionally under-resourced and hard-to-reach populations.

ULC's Leadership Brief, *Digital Equity in the Age of COVID-19*,¹⁰ highlights the many ways that public libraries are uniquely positioned to lead efforts to address digital inequities at the systemic level, including prioritizing efforts to increase home broadband access. This Leadership Brief was developed by ULC's Digital Equity action team,¹¹ which was formed in direct response to the pandemic and represents leading library executives from across the country.

Here are a few examples of leading library work to build home broadband access:

- In Baltimore, Md., Enoch Pratt Free Library has installed an antenna on the roof of a branch library to beam wireless internet directly to 50 households in an area of the community with low connectivity.
- In Salt Lake City, Utah, the Salt Lake City Public Library's Digital Navigators¹² pilot initiative offers phone-based tech support and digital training for residents in three low-income neighborhoods, as well as digital devices they are able to take home and keep.
- In Kalamazoo, Mich., the public library's Digital Access for All¹³ program provided Wi-Fi hot spots to hundreds of Kalamazoo Public School students in need of internet access for the 2020-2021 school year that started in a virtual environment due to COVID-19.

¹⁰ Urban Libraries Council. *Leadership Brief: Digital Equity in the Age of COVID-19*. (September 2020). https://www.urbanlibraries.org/files/Leadership-Brief_Digital-Equity.pdf.

¹¹ See: <https://www.urbanlibraries.org/initiatives/going-forward-from-the-pandemic/action-team-digital-inclusion>.

¹² See: <https://www.urbanlibraries.org/initiatives/digital-navigators>.

¹³ "Digital Access for All." ULC 2020 Innovations Initiative. Submitted by Kalamazoo Public Library. <https://www.urbanlibraries.org/innovations/digital-access-for-all>.

- In St. Louis County, Mo., the county government granted \$4 million in federal CARES Act funding to the St. Louis County Library to establish a Digital Equity Initiative.¹⁴ The St. Louis County Library provided 10,000 hotspots, 2,500 Chromebooks and virtual tutoring services to students in 39 county school districts to help young people continue their education virtually.
- In Boston, Mass., Boston Public Library's Tech Goes Home program brings computers, internet and training to families and individuals throughout Greater Boston who are without technology at home. The program is directed specifically to those who are un- or under-employed, are from low-income households, have limited English proficiency or are living with disabilities. Each family or individual who participates receives 15 hours of live, interactive digital skills training, a Chromebook or iPad and, if needed, 12 months of internet services.

ULC respectfully encourages the Commission to implement the Emergency Connectivity Fund to allow for libraries to maximize their participation by incorporating key lessons learned by libraries across the country on the front lines of building digital equity.

Specifically, ULC urges the Commission to:

- (1) Rule that the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) does not apply to the use of the Emergency Connectivity Fund.
- (2) Ensure that E-rate funding through the Emergency Connectivity Fund uses a formula for libraries and schools based on service population and prioritize funding based on poverty level in U.S. communities.
- (3) Give applicants maximum flexibility related to purchasing of eligible equipment and services and flexibility in determining what constitutes an eligible location.

On judging that CIPA should not apply to applications of the Emergency Connectivity Fund:

- ULC agrees with the comments submitted by the American Library Association¹⁵: "The CIPA language says 'A library having one or more computers with Internet access may not receive services at discount rates...' unless it filters. The phrase 'a library' clearly means inside a library building. Acknowledging this, it is critically important to note that the ECF program is not funding the library's internet connectivity, it is funding connectivity to households and other locations outside of the library. Because of this critical difference in the locations where the regular E-rate funds are used and where the ECF will be used, we contend that CIPA does not apply to the ECF program."

¹⁴ "Digital Equity Initiative." ULC 2020 Innovations Initiative. Submitted by St. Louis County Library. <https://www.urbanlibraries.org/innovations/digital-equity-initiative>.

¹⁵ American Library Association comments, page 12. (April 5, 2021). https://ecfsapi.fcc.gov/file/10405314108601/ALA_ECF_Comments_04052021.pdf.

On the Emergency Connectivity Fund formula used for libraries and schools, ULC advises that:

- Unlike the existing E-rate formula for libraries (based on the size of the physical library building), the Emergency Connectivity Funds formula should be based on poverty levels and service population.
- In 2014, the FCC recognized research conducted by Stanford University and submitted by ULC¹⁶ which demonstrated that libraries serving the highest number of people and in areas of greatest economic need require a higher level of E-rate support to ensure equitable benefits from the funds available.
- Libraries who have piloted programs to expand home broadband access due to COVID-19 for educational purposes are experiencing costs associated with the number of people, students and families reached including the cost of individual hotspots and devices.
- ULC agrees with comments submitted by the American Library Association:¹⁷ “It is important for the Commission to recognize that for libraries, ‘educational purposes’ has a much broader interpretation than is the case for schools because libraries serve many diverse users in their communities.”
- Further, need has been shown to be the greatest in low-income urban and rural communities. ULC agrees with the comments submitted by Funds for Learning¹⁸: “Support should be prioritized for schools and libraries in communities that need it most. To effectively target those schools and libraries, the E-rate discount rate can be used to gauge the approximate level of the Homework Gap in a community.”

On giving applicants maximum flexibility related to purchasing of eligible equipment and services:

- ULC agrees with the comments submitted by the Schools, Health & Libraries Broadband Coalition¹⁹ that “the FCC should use the flexibility in the legislative language to allow schools and libraries to make their own decisions about which broadband services and equipment will best meet their communities’ needs.”

¹⁶ Urban Libraries Council comments, page 12. (April 7, 2014).

https://www.urbanlibraries.org/assets/ULC_Filing_FCC_040714.pdf

¹⁷ American Library Association comments, page 7. (April 5, 2021).

https://ecfsapi.fcc.gov/file/10405314108601/ALA_ECF_Comments_04052021.pdf

¹⁸ Funds for Learning, page 7. (April 5, 2021).

<https://ecfsapi.fcc.gov/file/1040665377537/Comments%20of%20Funds%20For%20Learning.pdf>.

¹⁹ Schools, Health & Libraries Broadband Coalition, page 2. (April 5, 2021). <https://www.shlb.org/uploads/Policy/E-rate/SHLB%20ECF%20Comments%20FINAL.pdf>.

- ULC agrees with the comments submitted by Milwaukee Public Library²⁰ that the FCC “should reconsider the restriction of funding dark fiber and self-provisioned networks to provide maximum flexibility to eligible schools and libraries in servicing patrons at locations that include locations other than schools or libraries.”

The impact of not having at-home internet is no longer a theoretical barrier. High-speed internet is as essential to 21st-century life as clean water and electricity. This is more than a technology issue — it is a social justice and equity issue. Home access to the internet, devices and digital skill-building opportunities for education, work, social engagement and communications has become a fundamental need and right for citizens in the post-pandemic world.

In order to ensure a strong and inclusive recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, every able party must be allowed to use their resources and capabilities to ensure that all Americans have access to high-speed internet at home. Thus, ULC urges the Commission to adopt the foregoing recommendations in order to enable public libraries to address the broadband capacity shortage across the U.S.

Respectfully submitted,

Richard Reyes-Gavilan
ULC Executive Board Chair
DC Public Library Executive Director

Susan Benton
ULC President & CEO

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²⁰ Milwaukee Public Library, page 2. (April 5, 2021). <https://www.fcc.gov/ecfs/filing/10405648223382>.